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CIA crews fired on Nicaraguans

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WASHINGTON — The CIA has advised Congress that American helicopter crews under contract to the spy agency opened fire twice on Nicaraguan government forces early this year, sources in the Senate and House intelligence committees said Wednesday night.

It was the first official disclosure that Americans working for the U.S. government had participated in military action against

Nicaragua since the CIA began organizing the anti-Sandinista rebels known as contras in late 1981.

The sources said U.S. civilian crews were involved in both incidents — the first Jan. 6 at the northern Nicaraguan port of Potosi and the second March 7 at the southern port of San Juan del Sur.

Although the actions raised concern among some members of the intelligence panels, the CIA justified them as defensive and in no way a violation of the War Powers

Act or congressional restrictions on direct U.S. involvement in the fighting inside Nicaragua.

A A CIA official, Chuck Wilson, said Wednesday night that he had no comment on the reports and would not confirm or deny them.

The congressional sources indicated that the CIA first advised both committees about the incidents during the political furor last summer that forced the CIA to end the secret mining of Nicaraguan harbors. The agency restated its

position when again called before the House panel in early December, the sources said.

The helicopters were part of the CIA-directed and -supplied paramilitary force aboard a mother ship that cruised off the Pacific coast of Nicaragua during the mine-laying operations, the sources said.

The sources said that during the secret briefings, the CIA explained that the actions were proper because they fell within its inter-

nal guidelines allowing direct U.S. involvement in fighting during emergency situations.

CIA officials told the congressional intelligence committees that in both instances the people involved were American civilians who flew the helicopters under contract to the CIA, the sources said.

These civilians were not identified and it was not clear whether they might have sustained casualties during the actions.

The sources said it appeared the Americans had had earlier combat experience, possibly in Vietnam.

The House and Senate sources said the CIA told the intelligence panels that the helicopters were assigned to the mother ship to provide defensive covering fire for rebel boats that came under Sandinista fire.

The Jan. 6 action occurred at Potosi near the Gulf of Fonseca on Nicaragua's northern Pacific coast,

an area the Nicaraguan government has allegedly used to ship arms to leftist rebels in El Salvador, the sources said.

The incident, they added, developed during a rebel attack on an apparent arms storage facility at Potosi. They indicated that this clash raised the most concern, because it appeared that U.S. agents might have taken part in an offensive action.

The sources declined to provide details, but an Associated Press account of the action said the American-manned helicopter joined with a rebel helicopter gunship to attack the arms storage site.

The news agency said the attack "was ordered by a senior CIA paramilitary officer, apparently because earlier raids by Nicaraguan rebels had failed to destroy the facility." The Herald's sources would not confirm these details.

AP said the building in question was damaged on Jan. 6, and during the action Nicaraguan government forces fired anti-aircraft guns at the attackers.

Senate sources said the March 7 action occurred at the southern port of San Juan del Sur, and that the action appeared truly defensive.

These sources essentially confirmed reports that the American crew of one helicopter provided

covering fire for commandos aboard a boat who had come under attack from Sandinista forces on the coast.

Despite the apparent CIA disclaimers, congressional sources said the disclosure that Americans had actually fired on Sandinista units was significant.

They said the revelation was sure to add fuel to the controversy over President Reagan's policies in Central America and whether the United States is deepening its involvement in military activity there.

The report of the American helicopter crews came on the heels of reports by The Herald's Washington bureau that a secret U.S. Army helicopter unit had flown clandestine missions in 1982 and 1983 into hostile territory in Central America to aid pro-American forces. The Pentagon has denied those reports.

On Sept. 1, two U.S. civilians, members of a volunteer group from Alabama, Civilian Military Assistance, were killed when the Nicaraguan rebel helicopter they were riding in was shot down by Sandinista forces during a raid on a Nicaraguan military installation near the Honduran border.

The CIA denied any connection to the volunteers but later acknowledged to the congressional intelligence committees that the helicopter they were in had been supplied by the CIA.